

*Citation for published version:*

Goodbody, A 2017, Epilogue: The Anthropocene in German Perspective. in S Wilke & J Johnstone (eds), *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond*. New Directions in German Studies, vol. 18, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, U. S. A., pp. 313-320.

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Bloomsbury Academic in 'Readings in the Anthropocene' on 21st April 2017, available online: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/9781501307775/>

**University of Bath**

## **Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **Epilogue: The Anthropocene in German Perspective**

Axel Goodbody

The essays collected in this volume address two questions. The first is what German thought and culture have contributed to, and have to offer in the future, what Lawrence Buell has called the “environmental imagination”. The second, to which I will return, is how literature can help meet the challenges which the Anthropocene presents.

In his landmark study of “Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture” (1996), Buell diagnosed a crisis of the imagination as a root cause of the modern environmental crisis and wrote of the need to find new ways to understand nature and humanity’s relation to it. To this end, he sought to contribute to the history of Western environmental perception by critically reviewing literary representations of (and reflections on) nature in American non-fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For German ecocritics seeking to contribute to the dual aim of enhancing critical awareness of environmental discourse and imagining more ecocentric ways of being, Goethe, the Romantics, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno have so far been key focuses of attention. The continuing relevance of Goethe’s holistic conception of nature and “gentle” scientific empiricism has been conveyed to a wider ecocritical audience by the recent number of the *Goethe Yearbook* on “Goethe and Environmentalism” (ed. Dalia Nassar and Luke Fischer), and in a series of articles by Heather Sullivan. Kate Rigby has discussed the Romantics’ ideas of nature as a language accessible to artistic intuition and of the poet’s task as its articulation in human speech (*Topographies of the Sacred*, 2004). These ideas fed into nineteenth-century Monism and twentieth-century phenomenology and continue to inform debates on inhabitation of place as a factor in sensitivity to environmental change. Others have examined German critiques of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century and explored the relevance

of Nietzsche's conception of nature and naturalness, interpreting his notion of the Dionysian artwork as a creative force which valorizes matter, the body, and the interrelatedness of nonhuman life with human existence (see, for instance, Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, 2016, pp. 63, 70). Jakob von Uexküll's conception of animals' perceptual environments (*Umwelten*) has played a foundational role in biosemiotics. Heidegger has exercised considerable influence over contemporary ecocritical thinking through his critique of technology and his concept of poetic dwelling, despite his fascist politics and his essential anthropocentrism (see Garrard 2010). Andrew Biro's collection of essays on the Frankfurt School of critical theory, *Critical Ecologies* (2011), is but one recent publication that explores the prescient thinking on nature in the writing of Adorno, Horkheimer, Bloch, Marcuse, and Jonas. Whereas the historian Anna Bramwell foregrounded the troubling proximity of German thinking on nature with fascism in the first half of the twentieth century in *Ecology in the Twentieth Century* (1989), subsequent publications have demonstrated how much more there is to German thinking, writing, and art. Colin Riordan's edited volume *Green Thought in German Culture* (1997) already included essays on Gustav Landauer's ecosocialism, catastrophic warning scenarios in the West German novel, Irmtraud Morgner's East German ecofeminism, New Age religiosity, the eco-aesthetics of Joseph Beuys, the Green *Bildungsroman*, and the films of Werner Herzog.

While ecocriticism was slow to emerge in Germany, it started, as Benjamin Bühler notes in his recent monograph, *Ecocriticism: Grundlagen – Theorien – Interpretationen* (2016), independently of Anglo-American theories with, for example, Hartmut Böhme's contributions to a cultural history of nature in Germany in the volume *Natur und Subjekt* (1988) and his programmatic calls to revisit eighteenth-century theories of the aesthetics of nature and art, and to develop the notion that it is the task of the writer and artist to enhance our perception of nature and our susceptibility to its beauty and intrinsic value. In the 1990s

Jost Hermand did pioneering work on the development of German environmentalist thinking since the eighteenth century in a history of ideas which embraces key elements of literary history. Now informed by an international range of theories and debates, and conducted in both English and German, German ecocriticism has come of age with edited volumes by Gersdorf and Mayer (2005), Ermisch, Kruse, and Stobbe (2010), Dürbeck and Stobbe (2015), and a special number of *New German Critique* on “The Challenge of Ecology to the Humanities” edited by Heather Sullivan and Bernhard Malkmus in 2016. It has acquired a distinctive profile through major contributions in the fields of literary anthropology (Hubert Zapf’s theory of cultural ecology), systems theory (Stefan Hofer and Hannes Bergthaller), genre theory and narratology, as well as through work on the theorization of place and dwelling, and the analysis of representations of disasters and risk perception.

One of the most recent studies, Sabine Wilke’s *German Culture and the Modern Environmental Imagination* (2015), identifies the sublime as the principal contribution of German thinking and culture to the formation of the modern environmental imagination. For Kant, according to Wilke the foundational figure in German nature aesthetics, the sublime is an interactive dynamic in which human subjects are not crushed by the magnitude of nature, but reflect on their relation to it, understand their ability to reason, and experience the moment as ennobling. Wilke interprets this open-ended, awe-inspiring human interaction with the environment as an ecocentric principle. Starting with Kant, she traces its influence in affording agency to nature and relativizing human dominion, in a tradition extending via the Romantic painters to contemporary German film. She writes of the relationship between spirit and matter in the nature philosophy of Schelling and Hegel, Nietzsche’s nature aesthetics, Heidegger’s critique of technology, and nature in the critical theory of Adorno and Marcuse, demonstrating the contribution of German philosophy to understanding humanity’s framing of nature. Arguing that others have looked at poetry and fiction, she then focuses on

the nature writers and visual artists Georg Wilhelm Forster, Alexander von Humboldt, Caspar David Friedrich, Albert Bierstadt, Leni Riefenstahl, and Werner Herzog and depicts their oeuvres as milestones in the development of the aesthetic dimension of the German environmental imagination.

The essays in this volume add new insights into this German tradition in literature, philosophy and the visual arts, with studies of Lichtenberg, Tieck, Hegel, Stifter, Storm, Haushofer, Sebald, Hilbig, and contemporary novelists, and excursus on Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, Ernst Haeckel's nature prints, and late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cartoons. However, they are also united in addressing a second question, namely, how literature and ecocriticism can help meet the challenge of the Anthropocene. Readers who have arrived at these closing remarks will not need reminding that this proposed era succeeding the Holocene, in which human activities have assumed proportions which are leaving traces in the earth's geology, confronts humanity as a collective with responsibility for maintaining environmental conditions on the planet such that they enable human and other life to flourish. Since the introduction of the concept by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the ecologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, a lively debate has arisen around its epistemic ramifications, and this has given new impetus to ecocritical work, anchoring it in broader projects of the environmental humanities, in which literary critics are working alongside historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, social scientists, and experts in religious studies and the visual arts, on subjects ranging from energy and climate change to biodiversity loss and human/animal relations. Dipesh Chakrabarty has been frequently cited as the first to explore the implications of the Anthropocene for humanities scholars, addressing in particular postcolonial historians and literary critics (2009, 2012). In 2015, no fewer than four book-length studies followed: Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* asked searching questions about its consequences for literary production and evaluation;

Adam Trexler provided a first overview and categorization of climate change novels in his book *Anthropocene Fictions*; Kate Rigby presented case studies of “environmental histories, narratives and ethics for perilous times” under the title *Dancing with Disaster*; and Tom Bristow reflected on poetry as an emotional form of subject formation and place-making in *The Anthropocene Lyric*. A series of essays on literature in the Anthropocene have come out in ecocritical journals and recent handbooks and introductions to ecocriticism, and a special number of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writing*, studies of American novels and the literature of the North Sea, and an edited volume on *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (edited by Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan) are among the publications on the topic planned for 2017.

The notion of the Anthropocene is not entirely new, and it could be said that Anthropocene discourse is merely facilitating continued discussion of issues hitherto approached through the lenses of deep ecology, sustainability, eco-postcolonialism, new materialism and posthumanism. However, with its emphasis on the global dimension of anthropogenic environmental change and the material-ecological limits to economic and population growth, and its erosion of the distinction between natural history and human history, the Anthropocene concept has made us think again about our values, and the consequences of seemingly innocuous actions in individuals’ daily lives when scaled up into the millions. Bridging the gaps between earth, life, and human sciences, the Anthropocene calls for a different way of living, and therefore an altered consciousness. It reveals modernity’s dependence on unsustainable consumption levels of concentrated energy. It also challenges modernity’s denial of ecological limits, its temporality, and its definition of subjectivity, forcing us to rethink such fundamental things as individuals’ right to freedom of action and even the limits of democracy.

Literature has an important task to perform in this rethinking process because it participates in the organization of our social reality through what Bühler calls “regulative fictions.” These metaphorical concepts define and constitute classes of objects and identities, imagined futures, and how problems are framed. By interpreting the past, dramatizing the situations and decisions of the present, and imagining futures, whether by means of narratives depicting the disastrous consequences of continuing current trends or in images of better alternatives, stories told about environmental change have a key role to play. We may not be able to step outside our anthropocentrism, but we can become more aware of it. Stories are media for debate and forms of collective sense-making. They can motivate and mobilize readers by investing abstract and seemingly remote issues with affect, and they can arouse empathy with human and nonhuman others, thereby helping us to see the world from new perspectives. Literature and art extend the semiotic horizon. They make more things matter to us, widen our sense of identity to embrace natural others, and foster a sense of care.

The essays collected here engage with three distinct dimensions of the Anthropocene discourse. First, they explore its genealogy, by considering earlier concepts which anticipated aspects of the Anthropocene. Secondly, they discuss literary and visual representations in a variety of media and genres. And finally, they consider the implications of the Anthropocene for aesthetics and poetics. They demonstrate that German thinkers have made significant contributions on all three fronts, participating in the prehistory of the idea in philosophy, its intuitive prefiguring in older literary works, and more direct engagement with it by contemporary authors. Ideas for poetics in the Anthropocene are identified in the work of writers both past and present.

Writing in the Anthropocene can foreground the impact of human activities on the planet, illustrating for instance how oil has shaped not only the economy and the layout of our cities, determining our everyday lives, but also how it has entered our very bodies and

pervades our aspirations and thinking. Such writing can reflect on the inconstancy of climatic circumstances, stress the fleeting appearance of humanity in the earth's history, and seek to overcome our blindness to our own materiality. It works with a variety of approaches and techniques, depending on whether it aims to convey lifeworld experiences or to subject traditional ways of thought to critical scrutiny. Exact observation of nature and empathetic interaction with the local environment, developing a sense of place-based personhood, is one possibility. Another attempts to alleviate the cognitive dissonance and non-identity which characterize life in the Anthropocene by making the scientific facts normally conveyed in statistics and abstract arguments more accessible to the senses, and grounding them emotionally. This can involve personification of natural phenomena, but it must do so without falling back into animism. Identification of the subject with nature must similarly avoid regressing into Romantic projection of subjective feelings onto the landscape. The four elements (wind, water, earth, air) can serve as subjects that foreground the agency of the nonhuman and its role in shaping our lives. A further traditional trope which may be adapted and made serviceable is (as Wilke has argued) the sublime. Anthropocene narratives can exemplify not only the limits to human agency and the agency of the nonhuman, but also hybrid agencies, and the porosity of the boundaries between humans, animals, and the wider material world. A 'metabolic' poetics of the Anthropocene might, for instance, report on what the author has ingested, as an example of the energy flows between humans, other animals, and organic and inorganic nature. More experimental writing can seek to open up a redemptive perspective of post-human interaction by means of analogies between human and nonhuman histories. Some Anthropocene art adopts a sympoietic approach, mimicking natural rhythms and patterns of articulation. Such co-production with the material world might take the form of fragmentary texts, collages consisting of multiple drafts and versions. It may be characterized by rhetorical techniques involving repetition, accretion, and



accumulation. (I have drawn here on Adam Dickinson’s fascinating keynote, “Poiesis of the Body: Chemicals and Microbes as Metabolic Poetics in the Anthropocene?”, at the EASLCE conference in Brussels in October 2016.)

Examples of innovative thinking on Anthropocene aesthetics are presented in the essays in this volume on Lichtenberg and Sebald, and in comments on the aesthetic theory of Hartmut and Gernot Böhme. Lichtenberg’s ironic statement that in view of the dwindling forests and shortage of wood, we should burn books to keep warm, is interpreted by Markus Wilczek as recognition of the necessity for cultural production to be cognizant of its material foundations. Lichtenberg’s style, which is characterized by obsessive stock-taking, is described by Wilczek as a “poetics of sustainability.” On the one hand, this echoes Ursula Heise’s advocacy of a “database aesthetic” (Heise 2016). On the other, the list or inventory, a form enabling us to get a phenomenon into scale and manage it, is equally present in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann’s poem “Landschaft,” published in 1975 in the volume *Westwärts 1 & 2*, alongside photos of wasteland strewn with refuse. Brinkmann recalls being sent here to collect caddisfly larvae in a school biology lesson, but what he finds now is an unidentifiable, half-dead tree, an abandoned wrecked car, broken glass, old shoes, a bicycle frame, and a rotting sofa strewn among the leafless vegetation. Lichtenberg anticipated this mode of representation, which has come into its own in the Anthropocene.

Another form of writing worthy of the Anthropocene is identified by Bernhard Malkmus in his essay on W.G. Sebald. This time it is a narrative structure that combines elements of autobiography, travelogue, nature writing, cultural history, and essayistic reflection. In his ‘history of natural destruction’, Sebald succeeds in resisting facile conceptions of loss-free progress, remembering its human and nonhuman victims, and modelling an alternative way of living based on attentiveness to material objects and ethical sensibility. *The Rings of Saturn* can be regarded as exemplifying Hartmut Böhme’s idea of

literature embodying the physiological memory of lost interconnections between humans and the biosphere, while simultaneously celebrating poetic expression as a partaking in nature as *physis*. This underlines the prefiguring of key aspects of Anthropocene poetics in Gernot and Hartmut Böhme's project, which sought to integrate culture and nature. As in Anthropocene discourse, their point of departure is the erosion of bodily/sensual frames of experience in everyday life and the need to reinstate them. Their conception of literature is as an archive of alternative imaginations of what it means to be human and as a model of an aesthetic sensibility that allows us to experience physiological and linguistic embeddedness in nature.

These and other creative forms strive to meet the challenge of living in the Anthropocene and help us reimagine our relationship with nature in such a way as to be mindful of our responsibility for the planet. In doing so they necessarily challenge the human/nonhuman binary and reflect a new sense of selfhood in which the human subject is no longer solidly bounded, but instead, as Karen Barad has argued, co-constituted through “intra-action” with the other of nature. However, it is not easy for literature to engage with this expanded sense of the human subject. For it cannot altogether cease to privilege the human, if the writer is not to be deprived of their single most powerful tool for engaging with readers: the focus on the human figures in all their fallibility and on their often complex emotions and actions (see Kerridge 2014). This is, as Timothy Clark points out in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, the ultimate conundrum for the novelist in the Anthropocene. While the essays in this volume show German writers and thinkers grappling with the problems associated with decentering the human, it is important that work on the subject does not end here.

## Bibliography

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Bergthaller, Hannes. "Cybernetics and Social Systems Theory." In *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*. Edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 217-229.
- Biro, Andrew (ed.). *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crisis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- Böhme, Hartmut. *Natur und Subjekt*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988.
- Bramwell, Anna. *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Bristow, Tom. *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Bühler, Benjamin. *Ecocriticism: Grundlagen – Theorien – Interpretationen*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 2009): 197-222.
- , "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History* 43:1 (2012): 1-18.
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Dürbeck, Gabriele and Urte Stobbe (eds.). *Ecocriticism: Eine Einführung*. Vienna: Böhlau, 2015.

- Ermisch, Maren, Ulrike Kruse, and Urte Stobbe (eds.). *Ökologische Transformationen und literarische Repräsentationen: Veröffentlichungen des Graduiertenkollegs Interdisziplinäre Umweltgeschichte*. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2010.
- Garrard, Greg. "Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17:2 (Spring 2010): 251-271.
- Gersdorf, Catrin and Sylvia Mayer, (eds.). *Natur – Kultur – Text: Beiträge zu Ökologie und Literaturwissenschaft*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2005.
- Heise, Ursula. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Hermund, Jost. *Grüne Utopien in Deutschland: Zur Geschichte des ökologischen Bewusstseins*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991.
- Hofer, Stefan. *Die Ökologie der Literatur: Eine systemtheoretische Annäherung. Mit einer Studie zu Werken Peter Handkes*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2007.
- Kerridge, Richard. "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 361-376.
- Nassar, Dalia and Luke Fischer (ed.). "Goethe and Environmentalism." *Goethe Yearbook* 22 (2015).
- Rigby, Kate. *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.
- , *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Riordan, Colin (ed.). *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997.

Schaumann, Caroline and Heather I. Sullivan (eds.). *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Sullivan, Heather and Bernhard Malkmus (eds.). "The Challenge of Ecology to the Humanities: Posthumanism or Humanism?" *New German Critique* 43.2 (2016).

Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Wilke, Sabine. *German Culture and the Modern Environmental Imagination: Narrating and Depicting Nature*. Amsterdam: Brill, 2015.

Zapf, Hubert. *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.